

A PEAK ASSOCIATION: NADA

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A peak association is only as good as the relationship it has with its members. As a peak body in the community services sector, the Network of Alcohol and Drug Agencies (NADA) examined the relationship we have with our members, what the expectations are of both parties and how we support our members to contribute to and participate in our activities. We had to honestly ask ourselves whether we were seen by our membership as inaccessible, remote and secretive or transparent, inclusive and effective? After a closer look at our activities we identified limitations in our current approach and quickly realized we needed to take the lead in fostering greater member participation.

NADA is the peak body for non government drug and alcohol services in NSW. Our membership is made up of organisations and our activities centre on how to support these organisations to respond to the challenges of remaining a relevant, responsive and sustainable organisation in today's climate. We have more than 120 members who represent a diverse range of philosophical approaches, types of service delivery and organisational structures. The majority of members are stand alone small to medium sized organisations and a smaller number come under the umbrella of larger parent organisations.

NADA offers its membership a range of services and products, some tangible including workforce development and research grants, while others involve more long term and at times invisible work including policy and advocacy initiatives with Government bodies. The benefit to members in participating in NADA's planning and policy initiatives increases their confidence, competence and orientation to the wider sector and system they work within. This translates into better grant applications, strategic local partnerships and internal management processes. They are also able to interact with similar organizations and develop peer support relationships.

The benefits of participating in a network are substantial for members. The challenges faced by managers and Boards of Management are similar in regards to compliance, reporting, grants administration, addressing continuous quality improvement and developing organisation systems including human resources and finance. Sharing the challenges, frustrations, successes and sharing useful resources and tools establishes a strong collegiate sector and a stronger collective voice for us as their peak. Locally it greatly alleviates the frustration of isolation in practice that many managers of small to medium sized NGOs face and that contributes to burn out.

There are also challenges in the current policy environment, with competition for scarce service delivery funds. Each member has a different approach to this issue, with some happy to share any detail about their organisations and others a closed shop. NADA has a role in respecting these members' points of view. To be effective in our activities we can ensure that members are asked to participate in activities that sit with their approach to sharing. Where agencies are not willing to share what they consider to be commercial in confidence information including policies and procedures, assessment tools and service programs, they still have invaluable contributions to make by way of commenting and advising on key issues that affect their ability to deliver services.

The strength of NADA's voice to policy makers relies on our reputation and ability to represent the needs of the drug and alcohol sector. It is vital that we accurately represent our member's views, and develop these views into coherent positions and platforms for policy makers. We have in the past collected these views through surveys, forums and questionnaires with a 10 to 20 per cent return rate that captures the same group of members. It is now our goal over the next 12 months to foster a broader range of members providing comment and support to NADA's activities. This will require us to build awareness, skills and ensure the work we do is relevant and captures our members' interest.

While NADA represents a diverse sector, it is made up of a collection of organisations concerned about the sustainability of their individual service. While we can identify collective needs, there are also clear benefits for individuals - to warrant their interest in maintaining their membership. To meet this need, NADA has tailored and targeted its communication with regular, relevant and timely information is now sent electronically and on paper. However the value of face-to-face communication and consultation cannot be underestimated. Where there has been personal contact between NADA and a member through an agency visit and follow up phone calls, there are obvious returns in regards to member participation in NADA's activities.

To build a strong sector, NADA's members need to be in an effective relationship with us as their peak but also with each other and engender the concept of a sector wide approach. To build a collegiate sector, NADA as a peak needs to continue to provide the avenues and opportunities for members to start building relationships and work effectively together on key issues that affect all types of services.

Our members are the key source of information that underpin our policy and advocacy platforms and drive the detail of strategies for the projects we manage.

Members can best contribute to the network by being active participants however this requires the capacity in both skills and time to actively engage. We see as central to our role as a peak to engage with the broader membership to build these skills and confidence and assist them to identify capacity to contribute and participate.